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Reimagining Mediterranean Spaces: Libya and the Italo-Turkish War, 1911-1912

Jonathan McCOLLUM *

The Italo-Turkish War, a struggle over the territory that the Italian occupiers later re-christened as Libya, became a heated ideological battleground for the emerging nationalisms of the Mediterranean. This paper delineates the contours of the geographical imaginaries of Italian and Ottoman imperial nationalisms and how participants and pundits of the conflict incorporated Libya into their national spaces. Examining the writings and publications of influential nationalist leaders Enrico Corradini and Enver Pasha, it compares the idealization of territory and the material limits of national imaginaries in response to European colonialism, the hardening of borders, and the emergence of a world system of nation-states.

1. Introduction

Ernest Gellner's enduring definition of nationalism – that it is «a political principle, which holds that the political and national unit should be congruent» – though admirable for its terse precision, fails to capture a most significant and contentious aspect of nationalism and the state-building projects in which it is implicated, namely that nations and political units must ultimately reside in a specific geographic space¹. Carving out these national spaces has been and remains a leitmotif of modern history generating a *raison d'être* for most revolutions and a *casus belli* for sundry wars across the globe. If there is a *modern* political imaginary, a recent episteme that divides the current political culture from its premodern antecedents, it is the national imaginary, which links nation and political

¹ GELLNER, Ernest, *Nations and Nationalism*, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1983, p. 1.

unit to a given territory². James Gelvin labels this diffuse social imaginary a ‘culture of nationalism’ and lists amongst its primary tenets the assumption that «nations enjoy a special relationship with a particular territory that is the repository for that nation’s history and memory»³. It is on the geographic plane that nationalisms are legitimized and become the accepted building bloc of the modern world: the nation-state. The ideological and the physical thus intersect on the soil claimed by nations, and the activities of defending, conquering, defining, and migrating to and from imagined national spaces are the sine qua non of *modern* history.

Stressing that conflicts over territory are the sites in which nationalist ideologies meet their material limitations, in the following pages I set out to recover two failed imperial nationalisms: Italian colonialism and Ottomanism. Pairing these two together may appear at first unexpected because the Italian state and its nationalism persist whereas Mustafa Kemal’s Republic of Turkey stamped out the last vestiges of an Ottoman state in the early 1920s; however, the Ottoman and Italian imperial fates are entwined, and the contemporaneous unraveling of the Ottomans’ Mediterranean empire and the rise of a short-lived Italian hegemony in the same spaces provide a glimpse at the contingency of two competing national imaginaries that collided in the central Mediterranean corridor⁴. Italy’s first national war, fought precisely a half-century after its unification, was a colonial effort to wrest the territory of what is now Libya from the Ottoman state and was of central import to the construction of Italian nationhood⁵. And yet, the Italian imperial designs for the territory to be its *quarta sponda* (fourth shore) and the geographical and imperial imaginaries that accompanied it foundered a few decades after its victory in the Italo-Turkish War (1911-1912). Likewise, an Ottoman imperial nationalism with its own attendant geographical and demographic imaginaries followed its soldiers into the field and provided the principles by which its officers understood and implemented their defense against their Italian opponents.

This essay, thus, employs the territory of Libya as a heuristic device to scrutinize two distinct imperial nationalisms and the ways in which they incorporated geographic spaces into their national syntax. The integration of Libya into these national and

² HOBSBAWM, Eric, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1990, p. 14. Hobsbawm contends that «[t]he basic characteristic of the modern nation and everything connected with it is its modernity».

³ GELVIN, James, «Pensee 1: “Arab Nationalism” Meets Social Theory», in *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 41, 2009, p. 11.

⁴ CLANCY-SMITH, Julia, *Mediterraneans: North Africa and Europe in an Age of Migration, circa 1800-1900*, Berkeley-Los Angeles, University of California Press, 2012, p. 198.

⁵ BEN-GHIAT, Ruth; FULLER, Mia, *Italian Colonialism*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2005, p. 2.

imperial lexicons points towards a reevaluation of the relationship between empire and nation. Nationalism has either been perceived as the death knell of the 'old empires' or as inherently antithetical to imperialism. As the modern colonial empires of Europe acquired possessions overseas they carried with them the seeds of their own destruction, transplanting a culture of nationalism into their newly acquired territories. However, such views tend to disregard the fungible and protean capacities of national identity. This paper thus follows a more recent vein of scholarship on empire that stresses the more ambivalent and elastic relationship between empire and nation⁶. For Italians, empire and nation overlapped as expansion in the Mediterranean could provide the means of recapturing its emigrant nation⁷. The nation, perceived as losing its lifeblood through emigration, could only be cured from this hemorrhaging through a settler-colonial expansion into North Africa. For the Ottomans, however, it was not migration but alliance and conversion to Ottomanism that could save its nation/empire.

Seeing these two modalities of nationalism emerging from a dialectic charged by the conflict over the imperial space of Libya, I take up an examination of two prominent nationalist actors whose efforts manifest the material conditioning of their ideologies and the imperial designs of their nationalist thought. First, on the Italian side, I investigate the political activism of Enrico Corradini, the founder of the most successful Post-Risorgimento nationalist movement in Italy. One of the most vociferous advocates for the Italian seizure of Libya, his name became synonymous with Italian nationalism⁸. Second, from the Ottoman camp, I proceed with an investigation not of an ideologue nor a political activist, but of a military officer Enver Bey, the future Enver Pasha, a commander of the Ottoman forces in Cyrenaica for the duration of the conflict. An early member of the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP), a participant in the 1908 'Young Turk Revolution', and a commander in the suppression of the counter coup of 1909, Enver Bey had already risen to distinction prior to his deployment in Libya to organize resistance to the Italian invasion. While historians have long considered the CUP a crypto-Turkish nationalist society, more recent studies have questioned its supposedly Turco-centric arrogance and shown its allegiance to a more inclusive

⁶ See LAWRENCE, Adria, *Imperial Rule and the Politics of Nationalism*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2013; SHIELDS, Sarah, *Fezzes in the River: Identity Politics and European Diplomacy in the Middle East on the Eve of World War II*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2011.

⁷ CHOATE, Mark, *Emigrant Nation: The Making of Italy Abroad*, Cambridge (Mass.), Harvard University Press, 2008.

⁸ CUNSOLO, Ronald, *Enrico Corradini and Italian Nationalism*, Ph.D. diss., New York University, 1962.

project of Ottomanization rather than an adherence to an exclusionary policy of Turkification⁹. As a leading member of the CUP Enver Bey embodies a current in Ottoman nationalist politics that shifted course not by dint of intellectual ambivalence but on account of changing circumstances. In many ways the careers of Enver Pasha and Enrico Corradini mirror one another – both were ebullient nationalist leaders whose relevance dissipated soon after the First World War as Mustafa Kemal's Turkish nationalism and Benito Mussolini's Fascism supplanted their respective movements. Examining these two leaders in parallel has the potential to magnify the ways in which these two nationalisms converged in their designs for the territory of Libya. Further, the differences between their geographical imaginaries of empire will bring into sharp relief the consequences of ideology for the territory's inhabitants.

While this essay selects these strains of nationalism for investigation, I do not consider these the only significant contestants in the constellation of nationalisms in play at this period. Certainly, the Italo-Turkish War and the subsequent colonial war of occupation was of considerable import for Arab and later Libyan nationalists, amongst others the young Egyptian nationalist Abd al-Rahman Azzam Bey, the first secretary general of the Arab League, journeyed to the territory to join in the fray¹⁰. Furthermore, by taking up the Italo-Turkish War (1911-1912) as my subject of inquiry, my approach truncates the periodization of this conflict. If this essay were concerned more with the development of either Arab or Italian nationalisms over the course of the longer war for occupation, the Italian war for Libya (1911-1931) would be a more appropriate appellation for this struggle¹¹. My point is therefore not to delineate the variety of competing nationalisms but to expose how two imperial nationalist currents intersected in North Africa. It is their particular articulation with the territory of Libya and the geographical imaginaries they produced that concern me.

2. The Geographical Imaginaries of Libya

It is, of course, an anachronism to refer to the geographic space in which the nation-state of Libya persists to this day (who knows if it will continue) as 'Libya'. For the Ottomans of 1911, the territory was divided into three parts: *Trablusgarp vilâyeti* (the

⁹ See KAYALI, Hasan, *Arabs and Young Turks: Ottomanism, Arabism, and Islamism in the Ottoman Empire*, Berkeley-Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1997; CAMPOS, Michelle, *Ottoman Brothers: Muslims, Christians, and Jews in Early 20th Century Palestine*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2010.

¹⁰ VANDEWALLE, Dirk, *A History of Modern Libya* [2nd ed.], Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2012, p. 27.

¹¹ LABANCA, Nicola, *La Guerra italiana per la Libia, 1911-1931*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2012, p. 11.

province of West Tripoli), *Fizan vilâyeti* (the Province of Fezzan), and *Bingazi müstakil sancağı* (the autonomous Sanjak of Benghazi). For Europeans the territory followed the Ottoman designations labeling the three provinces Tripolitania, Fezzan, and Cyrenaica, in reference to the seventh-century-B.C.E. Greek colony of Cyrene. Despite the division into separate administrative regions, Europeans and Ottomans often labeled the entire region Tripolitania (or *Trablusgarp* in Ottoman Turkish) in reference to its largest city. The title 'Libya' was introduced to the country only in 1934 when Fascist Italy conjoined the three provinces into one administrative unit. The introduction of this title, a reference to the ancient Roman province of Libya, attempted to bridge Fascist Italy's empire to its Roman antecedent by associating Mussolini's imperial ambitions with a glorious Roman past. Ironically, the title stuck even after independence not because of the absence of other names but because both the Sanusi monarchy of 1951 and Muammar Gaddafi's regime after 1969 hoped to dampen the centrifugal forces of regional divisions by adopting the Italian geographical designation. Our present difficulty with the proper historical designation of Libya in the Ottoman and early colonial period provides a glimpse at a radical transformation in Mediterranean space of which the Italo-Turkish War was part and parcel. The territories that became Libya required hardened borders and boundaries that both the Ottomans and Italians attempted to provide through the nationalization of the territorial gap between British Egypt and French Tunisia and Algeria.

3. Corradini's Nationalism, Settler Colonialism, and the End of Emigration

Florentine novelist, theater reviewer, playwright, and journalist, Enrico Corradini's ascendancy as a political commentator accelerated rapidly after the disaster of Adwa in 1896 in which Italian forces suffered a humiliating loss at the hands of their Ethiopian foes precluding any further expansion of their colonies in Eritrea and Somaliland. Deeply troubled by what he saw as an evermore inept foreign policy, Corradini devoted his literary pursuits to the expounding of his own political ideals penning two unabashedly nationalist novels, *La patria lontana* and *La guerra lontana* and organizing, along with Alfredo Rocco and Luigi Federzoni, *l'Associazione nazionalista*

italiana in October of 1910 and its literary arm, the journal *L'idea nazionale*, in March of the following year¹².

Emerging at a time when liberal opportunist Prime Minister Giovanni Giolitti was seeking allies to offset the growing pressure from socialists and syndicalists, Corradini's nationalists swung more political weight than the meager thousands of adherents that filled the ranks of his association would suggest. Germany's volition to expand its *Weltpolitik* into the Mediterranean precipitating the Second Moroccan Crisis of 1911 pushed Giolitti into the arms of the nationalists because with France's increasingly strident stance in Morocco it seemed to be Italy's last opportunity to seize Tripolitania from the Ottoman Empire with the blessings of the other Great Powers. Corradini, having recently returned from an investigative voyage to Argentina and North Africa, mounted a press campaign to promote popular approval for the invasion of Tripolitania¹³.

From a string of conferences held in May of 1911 and a series of articles relating his eye-witness accounts of Tripolitania and Cyrenaica first published in *L'idea nazionale*, Enrico Corradini composed his argument for intervention and occupation of Libya in his *L'ora di Tripoli*¹⁴. While he attempted to appeal to his readers' eagerness to reclaim national prestige after the humiliation of Adwa, he was more concerned with explicating the importance of Tripolitania as the fourth shore of Italy. Responding to proponents of a 'peaceful colonization', amongst others Luigi Einaudi and Francesco Saverio Nitti, who saw in Italy's immigrant communities in South America and North Africa an indispensable relief valve («una valvola di sfogo») for Italy's overpopulated and indigent urban and rural areas, Corradini answered back that the increasing emigration was indicative of a near-fatal wound that threatened to sap the vital energies of the nation¹⁵. Between 1880 and 1915, over thirteen million Italians abandoned their homeland in search of a new life on different shores – an emigration incomparable to any other in recorded history¹⁶. Despite this immense outflow of people, population density between 1861 and 1911 still increased by nearly 40 percent from 87 to 123 persons per square kilometer¹⁷. Imperial expansion into Tripolitania

¹² LABANCA, Nicola, *Oltremare: Storia dell'espansione coloniale italiana (Overseas, History of Italian Colonial Expansion)*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2002, p. 112.

¹³ CORRADINI, Enrico, *Il volere d'Italia*, Napoli, Francesco Perrella, 1911, p. 143.

¹⁴ CORRADINI, Enrico, *L'ora di Tripoli*, Milano, Fratelli Treves, 1911.

¹⁵ PAGANO, Tullio, «From Diaspora to Empire: Enrico Corradini's Nationalist Novels», in *MLN*, 119, 1/2004, pp. 67-69.

¹⁶ CHOATE, Mark, *op. cit.*, p. 1.

¹⁷ SEGRE, Claudio, *L'Italia in Libia, Dall'eta giolittiana a Gheddafi*, Milano, Feltrinelli Editore, 1978, p. 14.

presented the cure for Italy's terminal illness, its «diminutio capitis», that had rendered it a «nazione proletaria»¹⁸.

For Corradini empire was not an economic venture in the traditional sense; neither to obtain valuable raw materials nor to uncover new export markets did he advocate imperialism. Empire was to be a settler-colonial endeavor to recapture the nation's most valuable resource, its citizens. Having witnessed the conditions of Italian immigrants in Tunisia, Corradini explained that the French preferred to hire Arabs over the Italians for multiple reasons. «First of all, the Arab worker requires far less pay; secondly, he is immune to the spirit of subversion 'à la Européenne' and doesn't strike»¹⁹. The economic structure of European colonial regimes, Corradini thus explained, merely served to perpetuate the proletarianization of Italians on a global scale. Forced to compete with Arabs for work in North African colonies, they could only hope for short-term contracts or wages as low as their native competitors.

Corradini's observation of the plight of the European immigrant laborer in the Mediterranean corresponds to the then contemporary Zionist labor struggles in the First and Second Aliyah. Yet, while the Second Aliyah's response was a campaign for the 'conquest of labor' through the collectivization of land usage, Corradini supported an expansion of the Italian state, a veritable 'conquest of land' and the establishment of fair labor practices under the auspices of Italian law²⁰. In contrast to socialists, he explained, «Our thesis is the opposite of what the socialists support. Socialism says: "The politics of colonial conquest is in opposition (*contraria all'utile*) to the proletariat!" We say: "In opposition (*Contraria all'utile*) to the proletariat is emigration"»²¹. The reason for his objection to socialist support for emigration and aversion to colonial conquest were the economic needs of the Italian worker. He announced that even «in France, the most civilized of nations, the foreigner worker, that is the Italian emigrant, is subjected to a condition of inferiority to the national worker»²². A 'sincere' socialism must therefore actively support the proletariat not by promoting an economically injurious system of exploitation of foreign laborers but by encouraging imperial expansion²³.

Imperial conquest, for Corradini, thus deviates from the European 'capitalist' pattern typical to other west European empires. «Ours, on the other hand, will be a

¹⁸ CORRADINI, Enrico, *Il volere d'Italia*, cit., p. 21, 59.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 42.

²⁰ SHAFIR, Gerson, *Land, Labor and the Origins of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict, 1882-1914*, Berkeley-Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1989.

²¹ *Ibidem*, p. 21.

²² *Ibidem*, p. 24.

²³ *Ibidem*, p. 239.

typical populist colonization, or, if you will, proletarian»²⁴. As such, the acquisition of land was the motivating factor for imperial expansion and the ultimate goal of conquest. Given these colonial designs it is not surprising that Corradini's discussion of the land of Tripolitania and Cyrenaica conforms to the observed tropes of settler colonial literature. Lorenzo Veracini explains that in such literature the traditional colonial 'encounter' is rendered into «a settler colonial 'non-encounter,' a circumstance fundamentally shaped by the recurring need to disavow the presence of indigenous 'others'»²⁵. Or, as Gabriel Piterberg has shown, land is metaphorically 'emptied' before it is physically 'emptied'²⁶.

Emptying the land of its inhabitants and justification for Italian seizure of Ottoman territory are interwoven in Corradini's vehement appeal for war. For a text wholly devoted to an impending conflict with the Ottoman Empire, the term 'Ottoman' is conspicuously absent from his *L'ora di Tripoli*. Only on a couple occasions did he apply the word in reference to the Ottoman Empire, always reminding the reader of its senescence as the «moribund Ottoman Empire» (il ruinante Imperio Ottomano)²⁷. Instead of conceding an Ottoman nationality or nation, he divided the inhabitants of its last North African possession into his own national groupings, «the native Berbers, the Arabs, and the Turks»²⁸. The Turks, having supplanted the Arabs as the rulers of the territory, had no claim to what he termed «il principio di nazionalità» (the national principle). Having thus distinguished the Turks as an alien tyranny in Tripolitania, he asked rhetorically, «against which nationality will we advance: against that of the Turks, against that of the Arabs, or against that of the Berbers»²⁹. Through a discursive sleight of hand Corradini thus metaphorically emptied the territory of colonial others by first dividing them and then championing their conquest:

Therefore, the national organism fractures (*si rompe*) and dies (and everything dies in this world, nations just as individuals); therefore, the national organism dies, and we have nothing but to carry the corpse to the cemetery. That is to say, dead individuals are delivered to the cemetery; dead national peoples are subjugated (*si sottomettono*). And it is just, because they no longer possess the forces, that is the national organization (*ordinamento*), to appreciate (*far valere*), as much as they

²⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 238.

²⁵ VERACINI, Lorenzo, «Introducing *Settler Colonial Studies*», in *Settler Colonial Studies*, 1, 1/2011, pp. 1-12, p. 2.

²⁶ PITERBERG, Gabriel, «Erasures», in *New Left Review*, 10 4/2001, pp. 31-33.

²⁷ CORRADINI, Enrico, *L'ora di Tripoli*, cit., p. 7.

²⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 11.

²⁹ *Ibidem*.

can appreciate, the territory upon which they live: and therefore that relationship of equity which first existed no longer exists between them and their territory³⁰.

Corradini thus mobilized his national principle to forcibly eject the inhabitant nationalities, categorizing and dismissing them as either tyrannical Turks or indigent natives, from the territory of Tripolitania. His ideology of nationalism uncannily anticipated the National Socialist quest for *Lebensraum* in Eastern Europe with its infatuation with ethnic taxonomy and its annihilation of peopled spaces in the name of national expansion.

Corradini's national ideology was also grounded in reality. While he made mention of Libya's former incorporation into the Roman Empire, his goal was never to resurrect the glory of Rome and extend Italian territory throughout the Mediterranean³¹. His own national designs emanated from the very real circumstances of the Mediterranean. France, pushing in from Algeria and Tunisia, and England, already in firm control of Egypt, left little room for Italian expansion in the region. Tripolitania and Cyrenaica were the last scraps that had not yet been incorporated into a European map of the Mediterranean. For all his references to Libya as a 'florid oasis' in the desert, his ultimate appeal for imperial conquest came from a more sober appreciation of the limits of Italian expansion in the ever-shrinking spaces of a Mediterranean divided into national territories. Ultimately, Corradini's nationalists provided a vision for expansion that would take decades to reach fruition when Mussolini reinvigorated efforts to Italianize Libya through increased investment in settlement. Nonetheless, the nationalist campaign for conquest yielded some immediate results and provided a further impetus for Giolitti's government to invade.

4. Seizing Tripolitania

Leading the fleet charged with occupying Tripolitania and Cyrenaica were the first-class iron dreadnoughts of the Italian Navy, *Vittorio Emanuele*, *Regina Elena*, *Roma*, and *Napoli*. By 2 October 1911 they were anchored off the port of Tripoli and after a delay of 24 hours commenced their bombardment of the city's outlying forts. Thus the first shots of the Italo-Turkish War landed on the Arab port of Tripoli.

Bowing to the demands of the war hawks in his government and the popular campaign lobbying for invasion, Prime Minister Giovanni Giolitti had probed his

³⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 12.

³¹ *Ibidem*, p. 13.

European counterparts for their reactions to an Italian occupation of the Ottoman Vilâyets of Tripolitania and Cyrenaica. In fact, Italian ministers had long demonstrated more concern about the repercussions of their North African venture on 'the Eastern Question' than on its military feasibility. In planning for the war, the Italians had amassed an expeditionary force of 34,000 men, 6,300 horses and mules, 1050 wagons, 48 field guns, and 24 mountain guns, which, the Italian General Staff assumed, would be more than enough to overwhelm the small Ottoman garrisons in the territories totaling no more than 5,000 men³². The Italian strategists, believing that the rapid capture of a few significant ports would be sufficient to bring the Ottomans to the bargaining table, planned for a naval war of short duration.

When the first troops met fierce resistance not only from the Ottoman garrisons but from the local population, the Italian General Staff expressed wonder. The General Staff attributed the fact that the population «became hostile» to «the efficacy of Turkish propaganda» and ascribed the Turkish successes at repulsing Italian attacks to «their admirable knowledge of the intricate and treacherous locality»³³.

Hoping to mollify the population, Rear Admiral Borea Ricci made a proclamation assuring the rights of the inhabitants of Tripoli to their property and abolishing the Ottoman practices of conscription and the head tax³⁴. The proclamation asserted the altruistic desires of the Italian occupiers, who sought to lead the country from its «deplorable economic conditions» to one of general welfare, to bring Tripolitarians «from poverty to wealth, from misery to prosperity»³⁵. However, the benevolent effusions of the navy proving ineffectual, the Italian occupiers soon resorted to more coercive means to ensure the passivity of the Arab population. The first of a series of deportations, according to a directive signed by Giolitti, sent 595 Arabs to isolation and imprisonment on the islands of Tremiti on 26 October 1911³⁶.

Before the end of the first month of combat, the Italian advance had stalled just outside of the range of their heavy naval artillery. The Italians, better equipped and supplied, failed to dislodge the Ottoman armies of Turkish officers and local Arab recruits that laid siege to their positions. Writing for the *Berliner Tageblatt*, Gottlob

³² TITTONI, Renato, *The Italo-Turkish War*, Kansas City (MO), Franklin Hudson Publishing Company, 1914. The work is a translation and compilation of documents of the Italian General Staff on the conduct of the war.

³³ *Ibidem*, p. 26.

³⁴ GOGLIA, Luigi; GRASSI, Fabio, *Il colonialismo italiano da Adua all'Impero*, Roma-Bari, Laterza, 1981. The book contains a selection of official government documents and private accounts of Italian *colons* and soldiers.

³⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 161.

³⁶ LABANCA, Nicola (a cura di), *Un nodo. Immagini e documenti sulla repressione coloniale italiana in Libia*, Manduria, Lacaita, 2002, p. 121.

Adolf Krause, a German linguist in residence in Tripoli in 1911, marveled at the coordination of the Arab and Turkish forces in response to the Italian invasion:

With such calm and confidence everything is executed! The Turkish officers proved themselves outstandingly in a difficult and distressing situation, the whole of Turkey can be proud of them. An entire flotilla of a great power arrived to occupy an undefended city devoid of any soldiers. And the Tripolitanian Police! How have these brave men, who are mostly Arabs, managed to perform their most difficult duty day and night without falling to sleep³⁷?

This unexpected close cooperation between the Ottoman garrison forces and the local population astonished European spectators and frustrated Italian plans to occupy the country. An analysis of this coordination of efforts between mainly Turkish officers and local irregulars provides a new perspective on late Ottoman history, one in which the Ottomans could still maintain a multiethnic empire in an age of nation-states. But what were the contours of this alliance between local and metropole?

5. Nationalism, Territory, and an Ottoman Mission Civilisatrice

Enver Bey, then a major in the Ottoman Army and a leader of the Young Turk Committee of Union and Progress, departed for Cyrenaica on 9 October 1911 to recruit Libyan irregulars to fight the Italians then ensconced in Tobruk. Lamenting to his friend Hans Humann, a German naval attaché to the Ottoman capital, Enver expressed his worries that «Tripolitania, that poor country, is lost for the moment, and who knows? Perhaps forever?»³⁸. Although he saw little hope in reclaiming the territory – the officials in Istanbul were unaware that the Italian advances into the hinterland had been effectively repulsed – the sole reason for his mission «of the utmost secrecy», he explained, was to «perform a moral duty that the Islamic world expects from us»³⁹. That Enver Bey, a central figure in the Young Turk Revolution, would justify his

³⁷ SEBALD, Peter, *Die italienische Kolonialeroberung von Tripolis – gesehen mit den Augen eines deutschen Antikolonialisten, Gottlob Adolf Krause (1850-1938)*, in FRANK, Sabine; KAMP, Martina, *Libyen im 20. Jahrhundert. Zwischen Fremdherrschaft und nationaler Selbstbestimmung*, Deutsches Orient-Institut, 1995, pp 33-65.

³⁸ HANİOĞLU, M. Şükrü, *Kendi Mektuplarında Enver Paşa*, İstanbul, Derin Yayınları 1989, p. 79. The collection of these letters is in itself quite a story. The letters written in French and German to the attaché Hans Humann were only a few years brought to public attention by Hanioglu, who located them amongst the papers of German journalist and publicist Ernst Jäckh who bequeathed them to Columbia University.

³⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 79.

government's commitment to wage war with the Italians as an Islamic moral duty is indicative of a persisting Ottoman policy, which, with some success, legitimized its existence as the protector of the faithful⁴⁰.

After smuggling himself through British occupied Egypt, Enver arrived on the outskirts of Tobruk to take command of a growing army of Arab soldiers commanded by mainly Turkish officers. Within a few months he had assembled an army of 20,000 with over 10,000 camels at his disposal for supply. He found the Sanusi Sheikhs eager to bring what troops they could muster to fight against the Italians. Despite the Sanusiyya's (a Sufi sect with considerable influence in Cyrenaica) troubled past with Istanbul, Enver's familial relations with the Sultan (he was married to Naciye Sultan, granddaughter of Sultan Abdülmecit and niece of the reigning Sultan Mehmed V Reşad) impressed them greatly: «The Arabs are ignorant to the title Enver Bey, ... but they do respect the name of the caliph. I reign here as the son-in-law of the Sultan, and my country can also be proud of me from the perspective of my advantageous marriage»⁴¹. The Ottoman Sultan ruled also as 'Caliph of the Faithful', a title whose significance has often been ignored, and yet one that retained considerable traction with the obstreperous Sanusi Sheikhs⁴².

Enver would later receive a letter from the head of the Sanusi order Sidi Ahmad al-Sharif who pledged to support his cause:

Hail to the vanquisher of the enemies of the fatherland and of the religion, the son-in-law of his majesty the Sultan, the symbol of strength, whose wisdom makes him the greatest of the great men of the world, the leader of all virtuous monarchs, ... the light to all Sanusi Sheikhs, both living and dead...⁴³.

Enver's position as commander in the region of Tobruk as a Turk amongst Arabs who spoke different tongues was met with no disapproval or anxiety. Enver often employed an Islamic discourse to explicate his cause and for whom he fought:

⁴⁰ DERİNGİL, Selim, *The Well-Protected Domains: Ideology and the Legitimation of Power in the Ottoman Empire, 1876-1909*, London, I.B. Taurus, 1999. Deringil maintains that the Ottoman Empire, faced with a 'crisis of legitimacy', integrated Islam into its legitimating discourse paying acute attention to its role in the world as the protector of Islamic peoples and the sacred cities of Mecca and Medina.

⁴¹ HANIOĞLU, M. Şükrü, *op. cit.*, p. 92.

⁴² SIMON, Rachel, *Libya between Ottomanism and Nationalism. The Ottoman Involvement in Libya during the War with Italy (1911-1919)*, Berlin, K. Schwartz, 1987. Simon contends that the Sanusiya, with all their misgivings about Ottoman Sunni Orthodoxy, never desisted from referring to the Sultan as the leader of the believers.

⁴³ HANIOĞLU, M. Şükrü, *op. cit.*, p. 151.

And you ask me now if I would side with the Turks or with the Arabs! For me and for Sayyid Ahmad (the Sanusi Sheikh) nationality does not exist in Islam. Thus you see, that I will defend us by whatever means and will forget everything for that fight⁴⁴.

And yet, the Islamic inflection of his speech should not mask the national intentions he had on the territory of Cyrenaica.

Whereas Corradini's nationalism rendered Libya a fertile, feral land ripe for imperial expansion, Enver's imperial territory was one peopled by fellow believers whose alliance with Ottoman officers must be exploited as an opportunity to Ottomanize the territory. Shortly after his arrival in Cyrenaica, Enver set about establishing a school for the children of his irregular soldiers. After a few months of instruction he could boast that «today we gave out prizes to the young pupils, it was their trimestral exam. Everyone was amazed with their progress in such little time»⁴⁵ In the midst of a war and with serious logistical obstacles to overcome, Enver Bey devoted his time and attention to schooling the locals. He extolled his contentment at seeing his «150 young Bedouin pupils at the school accompanied by their parents who had previously feared seeing a school even from a distance» and excused his small handwriting in his letters to his friend as a means of preserving paper for his students⁴⁶. The war Enver waged was not just against the Italians, but one against the backwardness of the empire's peoples. It was to be a war of imperial construction bringing the benighted subjects of the empire the light of the Ottoman state. It was an operationalization of what Ussama Makdisi labels 'Ottoman Orientalism', a late nineteenth-century modernizing nationalist discourse of progress, an imperial effort to discipline and reform imperial subjects of a segmented empire of modern and pre-modern spaces⁴⁷.

Enver, educated at the elite schools of the capital and a representative of the modern vanguard of the CUP, enacted his own *mission civilisatrice* amongst his soldiers and their families. Organizing his Bedouin irregulars into companies, he even arranged for them to dress the part by distributing khaki uniforms of Ottoman regulars to replace their «national costumes». He reported with effusive pride that the Sanusi Sheikhs found «that the color of the military uniform adapted very well to the color of

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 188.

⁴⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 142.

⁴⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁷ MAKDISI, Ussama, «Ottoman Orientalism», in *The American Historical Review*, 107, 3/2002, pp. 768-796.

the terrain and that the troops dressed in this manner would be better protected»⁴⁸. At which point the majority of his irregulars eagerly replaced their clothing with new uniforms and thus Enver «had won for the motherland a completely regular army which will serve her very well»⁴⁹.

Enver, an Ottomanizing missionary of progress, perceived his role as military commander to be one of conversion. Rather than merely charging the Italian lines, he had to transform the land and people of Cyrenaica from its 'Oriental' state – he even uses the term to describe the Sanusiyya – into a progressive military force. He expressed with pride the providential force he had acquired for his nation:

I have become the master of the situation. Into my hands has fallen a power (the Sanusiya), a force for which the various powers of Europe, the Italians, the French, the English spend millions to have in their hands. Even the Khedive had tried to appropriate and employ them against us. And thus, this force has come to me without my spending a dime⁵⁰.

The land itself is of little use without the human force that sustains it. While Corradini's territory must be acquired to recapture the rapidly depleting life force of the Italian nation that an accelerating emigration threatened, Enver's national force could be accessed through an aggressive incursion into the same land, not to claim the territory but its inhabitants. Even as peace with the Italians appeared to be on the horizon, on August 30 Enver wrote of the opening of school facilities in the fortress of Guebgueb. In the same letter in which he expressed his concerns of a rebellion in Albania and war clouds forming over the Ottoman Balkan territories, he detailed his enormous efforts in educating the people of Cyrenaica. «God help us in this *ordre de civilization*. There is so much to be done in this country and that is enough to encourage a desire to work»⁵¹. After centuries of soldiers trampling the area the population and their environs have become «primitive, their homes, their habits»⁵². If it weren't for the minimal efforts of the Sanusi, «the population [...] would now be completely illiterate and without any religion»⁵³. The taming of this «mountainous terrain» presenting «enormous difficulties» could only be achieved through a rigid

⁴⁸ HANIOĞLU, M. Şükrü, *op. cit.*, p. 150.

⁴⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 151.

⁵⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 152.

⁵¹ *Ibidem*, p. 172.

⁵² *Ibidem*, p. 173.

⁵³ *Ibidem*.

education and the absorption of the people into a progressive nation⁵⁴. The territory could only be recovered for civilization via its people. Enver's Cyrenaica was not empty of people but empty of progressive Ottomans.

6. Conclusion

«Wenn wir unsere Ideale nicht verwirklichen können, dann können wir wenigstens unsere Wirklichkeit idealisieren».

Attributed to a 'German book' Enver Bey read while stationed in Cyrenaica⁵⁵.

The geographic space of Libya provided a venue for idealizing the reality of two struggling empires. Corradini's «nazione proletaria» and Enver's «sick man of Europe» both envisaged the land of Libya as a means of recovering a wayward population. For Corradini an idealized Libya would be a haven for an Italian proletarian diaspora capable of regenerated the nation's life force through reincorporation into an Italy with four shores. To create such a port of refuge meant that the territory would have to be emptied of its inhabitants, first discursively through the denial of an Ottoman nation-state and second physically through occupation, conquest, and subjugation to a settler-colonial force. For Enver, on the other hand, the territory itself was merely the staging area of an Ottoman *mission civilisatrice* that could restore Ottoman hegemony over the region through the educating and disciplining of a potential citizenry.

The dialectic that emerges between these two competing nationalisms at once signals the repercussions of their ideological variations and the ultimate unity of their intentions. While it would take decades for Corradini's designs to take root in Libya, the result of an emptying of its indigenous inhabitants was the death by warfare, disease, starvation, and thirst of half a million Libyans over the course of the Italian occupation, a sobering statistic considering that population figures for Libya in 1911 range from one to one and a half million⁵⁶. The repercussions of Italian occupation reverberate even today as Libya's 'weak-state' or 'failed-state' status is often attributed, at least in part, to the lack of institutions and state-building under the Italian settler-colonial regime⁵⁷. Had an Ottoman Orientalist style state-building persisted, the results may have been far more amenable to the Libyan population. And yet, nationalist designs on Libya,

⁵⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁵⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 168.

⁵⁶ AHMIDA, Ali, *The Making of Modern Libya: State Formation, Colonization, and Resistance, 1830-1932*, Albany, State University of New York Press, 1994, p. 1.

⁵⁷ See both AHMIDA, Ali, *op. cit.*; VANDEWALLE, Dirk, *op. cit.*

whether Ottoman or Italian, concur in their idealization of space – both set out to build on Libyan soil a definable modern national space that would separate it from similar spaces constructed on its flanks. The Italo-Turkish War was thus intended to complete the nationalization of the Mediterranean.

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